

Qom

Tourism succeeded where politics failed

Report and photos by Walid Abdul-Amir Alwan

I was preparing my cases, ready to go to Qom, to visit the holy places, but I was worried about what kind of reception an Iraqi would receive from the people of a country who have suffered greatly from the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, in which more than a million lives were lost. Sadly, some problems emanating from that conflict remain unresolved.

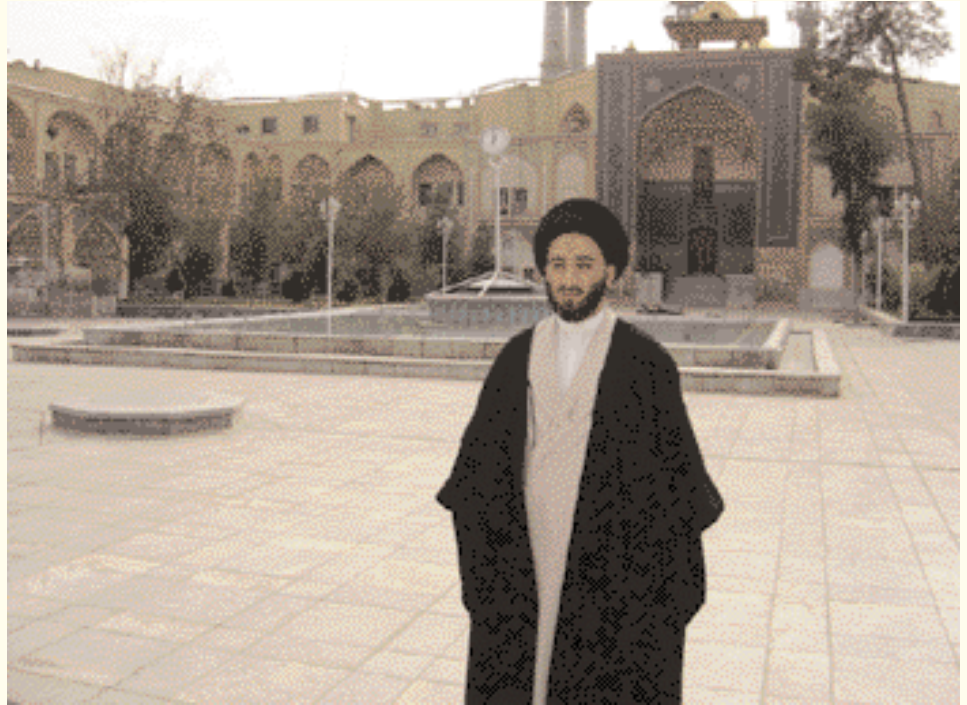
All my fears and suspicions were dissipated on my arrival in the border city of Mahran, where I was accommodated like any other visitor, with transparency and benevolence. Many Iraqis are visiting Iran despite the cold climate. The Iranians showed their good will towards us by presenting us with an insurance document only given to Iraqis in case we had an accident while in their country. We saw many Iraqi military vehicles on the side of the road at Mahran, vestiges of the combat which had taken place in the city. Most of the cities we passed through had large portraits of leaders and scholars - victims of this tragic war.

The Road To Qom

Qom was 732 km away. Karman Shah is 270km from the border in the Western zone of Iran, with a Kurdish majority. We crossed mountains and tunnels, on a road catering to the needs of travelers with various mosques, toilets, restaurants, shops etc. On the desert stretch of this road between the capital Teheran and Qom, is the salt lake, where we were told SAVAK (the Shah's secret police) threw the bodies of its hapless victims to dissolve.

The City's Historical Significance

The city became significant, since the time of the burial of Fatema the daughter of Imam Moussa Al-Kadhim, the 7th Imam in the Shiite faith, and the sister of Imam Ali Al-Ridha, the 8th Imam, buried in the town



A student at Al-Faydiyah school. He is a (ص) أحد طلبة العلوم الدينية من الذين يعود نسبهم إلى الرسول والمعروفين بـ(السادة) والذي يدرس في المدرسة الفيضية.

of Mashad, located 912 km from Qom. The history of this city goes back to the period preceding its conquest by Moslems to the era of Kisra Anoshirawan. Its original name was Kam, meaning "little" - it was once only a small village. Following the Muslim conquest, its name was Arabised to Qom. The Asharites settled there in 49 A.H. and were responsible for impressive construction and development. One still finds some families bearing the Al-Ashari name in this city.

Qom Today

This province, 125 km, south of Tehran, is one of Iran's smallest provinces, inhabited by little more than one million people. However, it is regarded as the second Holy City after Mashad, because it shelters the burial of Fatema, called Al-Maasouma or Maasoumat Qom, the Infallible One. This city is also regarded as a city of religious sciences, because it is home to the most famous religious schools, Hawzate Al-Ilmiyah, directed by prominent ➤



One of the entrances to the shrine of Fatema the Infallible.

أحد المداخل إلى ضريح السيدة فاطمة



Visitors inside the shrine

مجموعة من الزوار يؤدون مراسيم الزيارة

theologists, known as the Marajia. The state does not have any authority over these institutions, which played a major role in deposing the Shah.

The Immaculate Mausoleum

Historians tell us that Fatema the Infallible One came to Perse in 201 A.H., from

Medina, to visit her brother Imam Ali Moussa Al-Ridha, who resided in Tus city (present-day Mashad). But she passed away in the suburbs of Qom and was buried there. After a certain time, this ground was transformed into a cemetery where thousands of scholars, leaders and sultans were subsequently buried. The area became the centre of present-day Qom.

Historical records show that the immaculate mausoleum of Mashad was at first nothing more than a hut built by the governor of the city, Moussa Ben Khazraj Al-Ashari. Today it is a gigantic golden dome, surrounded by minarets. During its history, Mashad witnessed many developments: the mausoleum is an example of fine Muslim architecture. It is built on an area of about 14,000 m², includes a hall, walkways and three esplanades. If the three mosques Al-Tabatabai, Balasir and the Large Mosque which has a surface of 11,000 m² are included, the surface area totals 25,000 m².

At the entrance to the city are two minarets surrounding a dome with a bright, shining light overhanging a mausoleum decorated with gold, 5,25 m x 4,37 m.

This mausoleum is surrounded by multiple halls. The northern hall, decorated with gold is called the Hall of Gold. It has two minarets and a gate called the Gate of Gold. In the east, one finds a hall decorated with hundreds of mirrors, reflecting lights and embellishing the structure. It is connected to the holy place by a corridor. On one of the overhanging minarets is inscribed: "Nothing is possible without the assistance of God" and on the other "Thanks be to God, praise to God, there is no God other than God and God is great". Visiting this shrine is a unique experience: in addition to the climate of spirituality and peace, there is the beauty of the place, the minarets which reach to the heavens, the lights which are reflected in the hall decorated with mirrors, the doves which fly overhead, and fountains flowing with water into beautiful basins.

Close to the holy place, is the museum of the mausoleum: two floors of a rare collection of gifts and invaluable articles, left as offerings through the ages. Among the treasures is a specimen of the Koran, written in the second century Hegri. ➔



It was 2. 50 a.m. and we were astonished to see the city still full of life. It was easy to find lodgings, in a house transformed to accommodate visitors. The city is prepared to accommodate visitors, whatever their number: the Azinabyah mosque was used to accommodate Iraqi visitors, free of charge, for five days. It is located opposite the mausoleum of Fatema, in the Kaderkhan district, whose inhabitants consist largely of Iraqis who were forced to leave their country during the seventies and eighties. Walking through the area is like being in Iraq: the speech is Iraqi, the restaurants offer Iraqi dishes and most of the visitors are Iraqi.

The City Of Knowledge And Scholars

The city evolved and flourished due to the interest of the new leaders: it became a centre for major theologians and religious teaching, with more than 60,000 students and researchers in Islamic sciences and more than fifty religious schools. In addition to, Hawza Al-Ilmiya, there is the International Centre of Islamic Studies, which accommodates nearly 10,000 non-Iranian students from more than 90 countries.

The studies are not limited to men. More than 15,000 female students, including non-Iranians, have enrolled, at various levels, in schools reserved for them.

Al-Faydiyah School

It is incumbent on visitors to Qom to visit Al-Faydiyah school, regarded as one of the most famous scientific establishments in the world - the school from which the Iranian revolution started. The room where Imam Khomeini studied has been preserved and attracts thousands of visitors. This school dates back to the middle of the 6th century of Hegira, and its oldest part is the southern hall.

There are four halls and two floors. The ground floor includes 40 rooms, whose construction goes back to the Qajari era. The second floor has the same number of rooms. This school is connected to the mausoleums of Fatema, by an old esplanade. There is a staircase to a mosque, with fine architecture, in the school yard.

The south-eastern part of the town of Qom is dominated by the Jamkaran mosque,



Women on their way to the shrine

نسوة يستعدن لدخول الضريح

founded in 393 H. The inhabitants of the city believe that it was built on the orders of Imam Mahdi, the last of the 12 Imams of the Shiites. It receives thousands of visitors and pilgrims, who come to pray and to be blessed. Tuesday is the busiest day when believers come to beseech the appearance of Imam Al-Hojja Al-Montadar (The Awaited Imam).

Qom, The City

We arrived at the last station of the city,

opposite the mausoleum of Fatema the Infallible One on the last day of Ramadam. It was 2. 50 a.m. and we were astonished to see the city still full of life. It was easy to find lodgings, in a house transformed to accommodate visitors. The city is prepared to accommodate visitors, whatever their number: the Azinabyah mosque was used to accommodate Iraqi visitors, free of charge, for five days. It is located opposite the mausoleum of Fatema, in ➤



Women on their way to the shrine

نسوة يستعدن لدخول الضريح



محل لبيع (الساھون) وهو من أشهر الحلويات التي تصنع من قبل أهالي المدينة وتلقى رواجاً كبيراً لدى جموع الزائرين
Sweet shop



A street full with life near the shrine

أحد الشوارع المحيطة بالضريح وهو تضح بحركة الزائرين

the Kaderkhan district, whose inhabitants consist largely of Iraqis who were forced to leave their country during the seventies and eighties. Walking through the area is like being in Iraq: the speech is Iraqi, the

restaurants offer Iraqi dishes and most of the visitors are Iraqi.

The city has three faces: the old city, with narrow streets, and decorated houses, surrounding the mausoleum of Fatema the

Infallible One; the modern city, with its grand boulevards, buildings of reinforced concrete, restaurants and hotels; the newest sector built after the revolution, with residential districts, supermarkets and agencies of international companies. Hundreds of students of religious sciences with their wide clothes and distinguished black turbans, indicating they are descendants of the Prophet, called the Masters are noticeable on the streets of Qom along with the common people clad in white turbans. There are also many women, who visit the Mausoleum of Fatema, shop in the souks, or come for Friday prayers in the court of the mausoleum, where the left side is reserved for them.

Despite the religious character of the city, women enjoy a great deal of freedom: one finds them walking in groups in the streets. It is usual to see women on motor bicycles with their husband and children. Female religious scholars are also a feature of this city.

City Of Culture

Qom is also the city of well patronised ➤



A market in Qom

أحد الأسواق في مدينة قم

public libraries and bookshops. There are even special book souks, resembling a permanent book fair. Most of the books are in Persian but the most famous Arab titles dealing with religious matters, interpretation and faith are also available. The most famous library is Al-Marashi Al-Najafi, which employs 160 people,

houses more than two million manuscripts and printed books and has the latest equipment and facilities. Its founder, a famous religious scientist who passed away in 1990, is buried at the entrance, in accordance with his wish: "Bury me at the entrance of the library so that the researchers of Islamic sciences

can walk on my tomb".

Qom is Iran's publishing city. It produces beautiful, inexpensive books in various languages. Manuscripts are also edited in specialised establishments.

Tourist Attractions

One of the most significant tourist and religious attractions of the city is, undoubtedly, Bayt Al-Noor (House of light). It is the house where Fatema the Infallible One lived until her death. Thousands of visitors are attracted by the house of Imam Khomeini, located on Maalam St. There is also Al-Aadham Mosque (The Large Mosque), beside the mausoleum of Fatema the Infallible One. It has four halls and three large high, well decorated rooms, with a large dome. On the north side is a tower with a beautiful clock and bells, visible from four sides. The souk, it is located on the north side and is composed of 20 shops on the ground floor and 12 on the second level. It was once decorated with beautiful doors and windows but today only some remain.

Qom is a unique holy city, one of the most famous religious sites in the Muslim world. But above all it makes all Muslims welcome regardless of the troubled history of the countries from which they have come. Religious tourism has succeeded, where politics have failed, to unite the Muslim ummah and turn the Prophet's saying that every Muslim is a Muslims' brother into a living reality. ■



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